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Civil rights panel head decries congressman's remark

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CHARLOTTE, N.C. AP) - North Carolina congressman Howard Coble says he was only trying to make a point about segregation when he said he agreed with internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

But several of his colleagues and advocacy groups are criticizing the Republican's remarks, and the head of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights said Coble should apologize.

"For a public official to be speaking this way could send a signal to people about how they might be treated," commission chairwoman Mary Frances Berry said Thursday.

"What we need is stronger leadership from our national officials to set the tone for what is acceptable and what it unacceptable," she said. "That means all the way up to the president and the attorney general."

Coble made the remark on radio call-in program Tuesday after a caller suggested all Arabs in the United States should be put into prison camps. Coble said he didn't agree with the caller but did agree with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who established the internment camps.

"We were at war. They (Japanese (Americans)- were an endangered species," Coble said. "For many of these Japanese-Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street."

Like most Arab-Americans today, Coble said, most Japanese-Americans during World War II were not America's enemies. Still, Coble said, Roosevelt had to consider the nation's security.

"Some probably were intent on doing harm to us," he said, "just as some of these Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us."

Several of Coble's colleagues, including Reps. Mike Honda, D-Calif., Robert T. Matsui, D-Calif., and David Wu, D-Ore., have issued statements expressing disappointment in his remarks.

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle also condemned Coble in a statement Thursday.

"It's offensive and inexcusable that one of the darkest episodes in American history would be cited approvingly by a Republican member of Congress, particularly one whom the Leadership has appointed to head a sensitive homeland security panel," said Daschle, D-S.D.

Coble spokeswoman Missy Branson attempted to clarify his remarks.

"I think he was trying to make a comparison that 60 years ago we weren't a multicultural society," she said.

"We weren't as tolerant and understanding of other cultures as we are today. He was trying to make the point that the internments were as much for the Japanese-Americans own safety as for national security.

"He didn't mean it in any way discriminatory to Japanese-Americans at all. I think he's made that clear."

Honda, a Japanese-American who spent his early childhood with his family in an internment camp during World War II, said he was "disappointed" that Coble didn't understand the impact of what he said.

"With his leadership position in Congress, that kind of lack of understanding can lead people down the wrong path," Honda said Wednesday.

Both the Japanese American Citizens League and the Council on American-Islamic Relations have asked Coble to apologize.

And the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium on Thursday called on House Republican leaders to ask Coble to resign from the homeland security subcommittee.

Meanwhile, another North Carolina Republican is being criticized for comments she made last week to the conservative Heritage Foundation.

U.S. Rep. Sue Myrick was speaking on what she called Americans' lack of readiness to deal with future terrorist attacks, and about danger within the country.

"You know, and this can be misconstrued, but honest to goodness (husband) Ed and I for years, for 20 years, have been saying, 'You know, look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country.' Every little town you go into, you know?"

Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, called the remarks disturbing.

"Now we've got people saying everybody who works at the 7-Eleven who has a swarthy complexion is a potential threat," he said.

Myrick said she wasn't pointing a finger at any foreigners or ethnic groups. She said she was referring to federal investigations into "the illegal trafficking of food stamps through convenience stores for the purpose of laundering money to countries known to harbor terrorists."

"My point is people (who) don't like us are all over the country, and we know that," she said.

"I've got Arab friends. This is not something in any way that's condemning people. The point is very simply that we have to be alert to the fact that terrorism can happen anywhere," she said.